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Forward, Together

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Photojournalism

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Abstract

With 12,000 refugees and former refugees currently living in Syracuse, N.Y., there is so much more to the city than being just a college or basketball city. Refugees from Burma, Bhutan, Somalia and nearly 40 more countries have come to Syracuse because of the low cost of living, job opportunities and the strong relationship that refugee organizations have with the Syracuse City School District. Nearly 800 new individuals arrive each year and, yet, many people are unaware of the diverse population living in Syracuse, N.Y.

“Forward, Together” uses photographs, informational text and captions to depict the lives of two refugees in Syracuse that have bonded with others to create communities that promote education and togetherness to reach for a better future. Osman Ramadhani and Kiza Useni have added to the community in different ways. Osman is an active member of the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY, where he tutors students every Monday-Friday after school at the Southwest Community Center. He believes that education is most important and strives to promote learning in the community. Kiza Useni is a member of Hopeprint, which is an organization that helps to empower refugees by teaching them how to do things instead of doing things for them. Kiza's strong presence in the Hopeprint and the Congolese community make her home rarely empty, as friends and others often come to pay her a visit.

There are many refugees who are trying to adapt to their new lives in Syracuse, and “Forward, Together” shows the viewer a small sense of the communities created here.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Executive Summary	5
Foreword	10
Chapter X: Title of Chapter.....	11
Chapter X: Title of Chapter.....	29
Acknowledgements	47
Creative Essay	48
Works Cited.....	63

Executive Summary

While many people may only know of Syracuse University as a great basketball school or even a party school, most are unaware of the immense amount of diversity within the city of Syracuse, New York. I spent three years on the Syracuse University hill, only stepping off to explore the city by going to Armory Square or to the mall. Disappointed in myself and constantly complaining about the lack of interesting stories to photograph, I decided to take a stroll down North Salina Street in the fall semester of my senior year. As I walked down the street, I was amazed by the different cultures that permeated my vision, and my mouth watered as I walked by exotic restaurants and smelled delicious food cooking. I spent hours walking into random stores, chatting with the workers and making sure to smile at everyone that passed my way. Knowing that I would be spending a lot of time on the north side of Syracuse made me want people to become familiar with my face and know that I was a friendly person they could stop and chat with.

By doing more research on the city of Syracuse as a whole, I learned that it, along with other cities in Central New York, were considered communities that were able to provide refugee families with shelter and other services. Approximately 12,000 refugees and former refugees currently reside in Syracuse, with nearly 1,000 new refugees coming into Syracuse each year. According to the Onondaga Citizens League's report, "The World at our Doorstep," the "low cost of living, job opportunities and resettlement agencies' strong working relationships with the Syracuse City School District are some of the reasons why

refugees have been and continue to be resettled here.”

To learn from some of Syracuse refugees, I decided to create an iBook that would eventually be able to be downloaded from the iTunes store. The book contains photographs of my two subjects, Osman Ramadhani and Kiza Useni. Both Osman and Kiza impact the Syracuse community in different ways and are important to see how refugees have adapted to their lives in this strange new place. The iBook contains a short written section to introduce the viewer to the refugee community in Syracuse and to introduce them to my two subjects. Besides that, the photographs are the main focus, with captions included to help the reader understand what is happening in the photograph.

Osman Ramadhani runs the after-school program at the Southwest Community Center for the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY. At the after-school program, he tutors children whose parents were refugees and helps them with their homework. He believes that education is extremely important to help the children succeed and, because their parents often cannot speak English and are unable to help their children with their homework, Osman helps the students finish their homework. On occasion, Osman will also help parents who come by his office at the Southwest Community Center to translate their housing or government papers. Often they will receive important papers in the mail that they are unable to read and therefore find that sometimes their electricity or water is cut off, and they are confused about why this has happened. Besides his work with the community, Osman tries to spend time with his wife and four children as well as finish his degree at Onondaga Community College, which he has put off

in order to serve his community. He is set to finally graduate this May.

Kiza Useni is a presence in the Congolese refugee community as well as the Hopeprint family. Hopeprint is a nonprofit organization that helps empower refugees by hosting English classes, a program for kids, and one-on-one tutoring. Mainly, Hopeprint becomes engrossed in their members' lives and forms a single large family. Kiza has been a member of Hopeprint since the beginning in 2010 and has continued to go to their programs on Tuesday nights. Two of her children just arrived from the Democratic Republic of Congo on April 10, 2014, and I was able to see how the entire Congolese community of Syracuse came together to celebrate their homecoming. There was a group of people at the airport greeting and a party was hosted that weekend to welcome her children to America. Kiza, whose legs have been made lame by a bout of childhood polio, remains strong and able to fend for herself and care for her six children.

In order to complete this project, I connected with Kiza Useni and Osman Ramadhani and explained the idea of my project. Then, I proceeded to photograph them and their families as they went about their daily lives. During my time photographing them, I would ask them questions and spend most of my time talking to the family and the people around them. I would pick up my camera and take a photo whenever an opportunity presented itself, but most of my time was spent expanding my relationship with these families.

While I also photographed Kiza and Osman with their families, I formed relationships with the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY and Hopeprint to gain access to their events. As I photographed Osman tutoring at the Southwest

Community Center and Kiza and her children interacting with others at Hopeprint, I gained valuable relationships with others that I met while there.

In order to get insight about my photographs and the direction that the stories were taking, I spoke to my photography professors as well as other photography students in my program to see what they thought of the pictures. This helped me figure out what my story was missing and what to look for the next time that I went to go photograph Kiza and Osman. Meeting with my professors also helped me to sequence the images so that the story would flow and look great on the pages of the book.

My photo book, "Forward, Together," aims to open the eyes of students at Syracuse University as well as the eyes of people who simply know Syracuse as a sports school. The city of Syracuse is so full of diverse and knowledgeable people that students should get to know, explore and learn from. Refugees who are uprooted from their lives at home are forced to move away in the hopes of better lives and safer upbringings for their families. They have to learn a new language, find a way to support themselves and their families, and discover their place in a brand new home.

I, and many other students that I know, have come from a comfortable background and have never had to worry about having difficulty with English, nor have we ever been displaced from our homes. It is important to see these photographs of Osman and Kiza, who have successfully made their new homes in Syracuse, because of the difficult pasts they had and their struggle to learn English and, in Osman's case, to pass on that education. Often my complaints

included not getting enough sleep or struggling to get my projects finished, but I never had to worry about having enough food, being safe in my own country and learning English. These refugees have had to overcome so much turmoil and difficulties in order to get where they are now.

There are so many other refugee families and members of the community that have had an impact on their people and the city of Syracuse, N.Y. This iBook has the potential to be constantly updated with other families and other stories that are important to be told, and I think that that very fact will make this book and the photographs timeless. I can always come back to Syracuse, connect with a new refugee family, tell their story and be able to add it to the book and have it all connect. Overall, my photographs tell the story of perseverance, community, family and reaching for a successful future.

Creative Essay

My photo book, "Forward, Together," aims to open the eyes of students at Syracuse University as well as the eyes of people who simply know Syracuse as a sports school. The city of Syracuse is full of diverse and knowledgeable people that students should get to know, explore and learn from. Refugees who are uprooted from their lives at home are forced to move away in the hopes of better lives and safer upbringings for their families. They have to learn a new language, find a way to support themselves and their families, and discover their place in a brand new home.

With 12,000 refugees and former refugees currently living in Syracuse and about 800 individuals arriving each year, there are many stories to tell. These individuals come to Syracuse, N.Y. because of the low cost of living, job opportunities, and the strong relationship that refugee organizations have with the Syracuse City School District. Now, many individuals are coming over to be reunited with family members that were able to come to the United States before them.

The meaning for my photo book is to show how uprooted refugees have worked to create communities that promote education and togetherness in Syracuse, N.Y. Because I have been privileged enough to be a native English speaker and have never had to worry about having enough food or being safe in my own home, it was eye-opening to learn of the plights of these refugees and to see their determination to make better lives for themselves. It is my hope that these photographs will spur viewers to action and encourage them to become

involved with non-profit organizations that are working to help refugees get back on their feet. Organizations in Syracuse such as the Northside CYO, Hopeprint and Catholic Charities are just some of the not-for-profits helping the refugee population find jobs, learn English and survive in this new world.

One of my other goals with this photo project was to inspire students to explore the Syracuse community and step off of the hill. Most Syracuse University students don't take advantage of the wealth of stories and knowledge available to them if they were to take some time to get to know some of the refugees in the community. I spent three years at Syracuse University staying on the hill and only leaving to go to Armory Square or the mall. When I decided to finally take a walk down North Salina Street to open my horizons, I was amazed at the amount of diversity I was able to find. Instead of sticking to campus to find photo stories, I had countless possible subjects available for me on the north side of Syracuse. I fell in love with the people and spent countless hours walking up and down North Salina Street and Butternut Street just getting to know the area and its people. It is my hope that after seeing these photographs, students will make a conscious effort to take that step out of their comfort zone and find themselves in a whole new world. Syracuse should become known as more than just a college or basketball town.

As a photojournalist, it is my job to use photos to tell people's stories. So when faced with trying to figure out how to go about doing my Capstone project, it was easy to decide to make a photo book. I initially thought that the book would be printed, but I decided that in the digital age, it would be able to be dispersed

more easily if it were an iBook. My fellow classmates, members of the community and anyone else who wants to take a look at my photographs can easily do so. The iBook format also opened up the possibility of adding on to and putting more stories into the book after its publication. An iBook can always be edited and this gives me the opportunity to know I can come back to Syracuse, tell another's story and have a place to put the photographs.

There are so many stories and incredible people that I would never have had the time to photograph for this project, but I can continue to work on these stories for the rest of my life. Because of this, I believe that this book and its photographs are timeless, as there will always be a refugee who is working hard to better the community. They just have different stories that are waiting to be told. I would even be open to allowing other photographers to add their stories to this iBook so that it could become a collaboration with other photographers that see differently. That way, more stories could be told as well through a different set of lenses. These stories could even expand to outside of Syracuse and become a compilation of stories of refugees that I meet throughout my lifetime. The opportunities are endless because the book was formatted into an iBook.

In order to complete this project, I first had to form relationships with organizations that would be able to connect me to the certain type of individuals that I was looking to photograph. I often feel that the hardest and most time consuming part of photography is forming these relationships and finding your subjects. Luckily I struck gold this time and formed priceless relationships with the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY and Hopeprint.

The Wazigua Community Organization is a part of the Somali Bantu Organization in Syracuse. They believe that because of their strong cultural ties, the Somali Bantu thrive when they live in a communal setting. There are apartment complexes in Syracuse that are filled with Somalis who all know each other. The Wazigua Organization help new families by providing English training classes, working as host families and volunteers, providing transportation to and from grocery stores, helping families find jobs, and also donating household items and winter clothes. Some of the biggest challenges the Somali Bantu have when coming here are adjusting to the weather, learning English and maintaining their culture, and the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY does its best to help them make the transition.

Osman Ramadhani is a refugee from Somalia who spent years at a refugee camp in Kenya before coming to the United States in 2003. The first time I spoke to Osman Ramadhani and heard his story, I knew that he would be the perfect subject for my Capstone. Osman's determination to educate children with refugee parents and his insistence that they succeed often requires him to sacrifice parts of his life. Osman helped to found the tutoring program that the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY hosts every Monday-Friday after school. There, Osman helps students with their homework and teaches classes. The photographs I took attempt to show the trouble he has with juggling his busy home life and the way that he serves the community.

In order to tell Osman's story, I spent time tutoring at the Southwest Community Center and would take photographs whenever I felt that a moment

was happening. I followed Osman to Onondaga Community College where he is working to get his degree to be a physician's assistant and where he is finally graduating from this May. Osman has delayed getting his degree in order to keep serving his community. I also spent some time photographing him with his family as well as his efforts coaching soccer with the same kids from the Southwest Community Center. From my many times photographing Osman, I realized how much he does for others, how jam-packed his life is, and how much he cares about the future of these kids.

Hopeprint is an organization on the north side of Syracuse which helps to empower refugees. They say “empower” because they do not want to do all of the work for the refugees but instead want them to learn so that they can do it on their own the next time. Hopeprint provides personalized mentorship in their English classes, kids’ program, girls’ program, and their life coaching program. They also participate in community events such as Clean Up 'Cuse, where Hopeprint volunteers and members cleaned up the north side of Syracuse with other organizations such as Northside Urban Partnerships. As Hopeprint's offices are in a home instead of an office building, the feeling of community and family is very strong. Executive director Nicole Watts and assistant director Bethany Smith know every single member and volunteer by name and welcome everyone with a hug. This openness has helped Hopeprint thrive and continue to help refugees live empowered lives.

During my time interning with Hopeprint as their photo intern, Nicole Watts and Bethany Smith were able to connect me with Kiza Useni, a Congolese

refugee who arrived in 2010 after 15 years in a refugee camp in Tanzania. Kiza has been a member of Hopeprint since its start in 2010. Kiza's story is unique and different from Osman's in that it is not her serving the community that made her an interesting subject but it was more about her presence. The love that Hopeprint members have for Kiza and her family struck me, as well as how they integrated into her family. Sometimes there are just those people in a community that everyone knows and loves. Kiza and her family are those people for the Congolese and Hopeprint community. Hopeprint members were even there at the airport when Kiza's stepson and daughter finally arrived from a refugee camp after several years of being separated. Kiza's importance as a presence in the Congolese community in Syracuse as well as her role in Hopeprint make her a character worth getting to know. Her love of life and family and her contagious smile attract people to her, and her home is never empty as friends are always stopping by to chat.

While I photographed Kiza at Hopeprint, the airport, with her family at home and even photographed her children dancing at a Congolese welcome party, I feel that my photographs of her are not as powerful as the ones of Osman. I connected with Kiza very late in my Capstone period and didn't spend as much time photographing her as I would have liked. However, as mentioned before, an iBook can always be updated so when I come back to Syracuse I can reconnect with Kiza and continue photographing her and her family, especially as her stepson and daughter adapt to life in Syracuse.

Although this iBook has its faults, I feel that since these were the first real

times that I delved into long-term photo stories, it was important that I honestly cared for the people I was photographing. I never once felt like photographing Kiza or Osman was a chore and always looked forward to spending time with the members of Hopeprint as well. I think that when you really care about your subjects and the lives that they lead, it comes through in your photographs. I tried to at least speak to them once a week, even if I couldn't go shoot that week, just to check in on them and see what they were up to. This helped them become more comfortable with me as well.

My initial obstacles in trying to complete this project, and in any project, were finding my subjects. I tried to connect with the CYO and gave them a flier to pass along to their members but they told me that because many of the families had relatives still in Africa, it would be difficult for them to let me photograph them. If photos were to get back to Africa, it might place their remaining relatives in danger if they were in areas of Africa that were currently unsafe. Although I have not experienced this sentiment at all with the refugees that I have spoken with, I understood why the CYO was reluctant to give me anyone's information without asking them first. After sending out the flier, I didn't receive any contact from members of the CYO, so I decided to reach out to different communities and sent emails to every person I could find with some connection to a not-for-profit that helped refugees. Hopeprint and the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY responded, and I immediately set up meetings with them to explain my project further and find the subjects that I was looking for.

After getting in contact with my subjects, another obstacle was trying to

get them to understand that I would not get in the way of their daily lives and that they didn't need to entertain me when I would come photograph them. I had to tell them many times not to do anything special for me but to just live their lives. It is often hard for people to understand why I want to photograph them doing mundane things and show up so many times to photograph them. I appreciated Osman and Kiza for never asking me to leave when I would just show up on their doorsteps and always welcoming me in with open arms. Their families were also open and no one told me not to take their photo. Sometimes it was hard to get the kids to stop posing so I could take some genuine photographs!

Another obstacle but also a great learning opportunity was the language barrier. While Osman can speak English fluently, Kiza and some of her family members are not yet proficient in English. This made it difficult at times to interview them because they could not comprehend what I was saying, or I couldn't understand what they were trying to say back. However, I became proficient at using hand gestures to get my point across and it was actually amazing to be around these people who spoke a completely different language from myself. At the Congolese party that I attended, I was surrounded by people speaking in Swahili, and it was interesting to try and figure out whether I should be smiling or serious based on their tone and other people's reactions. Because I come from a town in New Jersey that is predominantly Korean, I am used to not understanding the language spoken around me, but to hear voices shouting in Swahili was such a new and interesting experience.

However, trying to explain my project to others that were around Kiza and

Osman was difficult if they couldn't understand what I was saying, and there was one instance where I was told I couldn't take someone's photograph unless I paid them \$5,000. When I tried to explain what I was doing and why I was taking pictures of them interacting with my subject, I was ignored. I learned a lot about gauging the sort of people that would let me take their photograph compared to those that would feel uncomfortable. Before taking their photo, I would normally chat with the person about what I was doing as well as make sure that they saw me with Osman or Kiza so that they knew I had someone's approval to be there.

However, my biggest obstacle was trying to find the time to photograph for my Capstone while also juggling my other photography classes. It's hard when your major requires so much work outside of class that is also dependent on your subjects' schedules. I found myself running from shoot to shoot, but I think that the constant shooting really helped expand and better my vision. Another creative obstacle was trying to get my photography skills up high enough to make the stories powerful. Looking through the photographs, I think they definitely could be done better and the story aspect behind the photos needs to be more obvious. However, they are done much better than they would have been only a year ago and that growth amazes me.

After taking the photographs, I showed them to a photo professor or peer. David Sutherland, Mike Davis and Bruce Strong, all professors in Newhouse, helped me edit my images and figure out which ones made it in the running to possibly be in the book. Mike Davis, who works as a photo editor, then helped me sequence the images and decide what photos would definitely make it into the

book. The sequencing of the images can completely change how the story is perceived, so it was important that I had help when doing that part. I am very happy with Mike's sequencing of my story because it has a nice flow, the colors mesh well together, and he made my Kiza story seem to have more than it actually does.

In order to create the iBook that would be able to be downloaded from the iTunes store, I used the program, iBooks Author. As a relatively new program, I felt limited in some aspects regarding the design of my book, especially with the widgets. Although they do provide you with layouts you can choose from, I found that there were some kinks in the program. A lot of my time was spent trying to decide whether I wanted all of my captions on a separate page or written underneath the photograph, but I eventually decided to use the popover feature in iBooks Author. While I wish that the program was advanced enough to allow me to move the popover to wherever I wanted it to go, I believe that the captions are easy to read and a viewer would know to click on the icon to get more information on a photograph. I do also wish that I had paired up with a graphic designer to have them help me design the book since their eye is more well-tuned to the design side of photo books and they may have seen some issues with my layout that I was unable to spot.

Although using a program such as Blurb may have let me have more control over the design of my book, I chose iBooks Author after some research, as it easily lets me upload the book to the iBooks store (it takes about a week to be approved and show up in the store) and it was completely free. As many people

have smartphones, the book is able to be distributed to many people and for those that do not have an iPhone, I can give them a PDF version of the book. I plan on putting the PDF version on my website for everyone to view.

After figuring out the basic design of my iBook and placing the images in order into the book, I worked on the text. I did not want my captions to describe the image, so I tried to include a tidbit about the moment or what happened after the moment into the caption. Captions are important because sometimes it is difficult to understand what is happening in a photograph from an outsider's view. While I know what was happening because I was there and photographed it when it happened, I need to assume that the viewer's mind about this is a blank slate and they need more information to explain some of the harder to read photographs.

I knew from the start that the iBook would include small sections of history and information of Osman and Kiza to give the reader some background information about the photos that they were about to see. The book started to get text heavy, however, when I realized that there was a lot that I would like to write about my subjects. However, it is only the first page of each chapter that includes the information about my subjects and I believe that it splits up the book nicely. I am excited for when Apple approves the book and it finally goes live in the iBooks store.

Recently, my work has been influenced by photographers such as Matt Eich, Gabriele Stabile, Judah Passow and Kendrick Brinson. When I was shown Kendrick Brinson's book, "Sun City: Life After Life," I was struck by the full page use of the photographs, how the book laid flat so that there was no center

crease going through the photos, and how beautiful and humorous the imagery was to the viewer. Looking at her photo book made me more and more excited for my Capstone to be completed so that I could display my work in a similar way. Kendrick's images have beautiful repetition, color and composition and I tried to fill the frame in my photographs as much as she does. I also modeled my book after hers, with minimal text and having the photos be the most important part of the iBook. If the book were to be printed eventually, I would want the same format as Kendrick's, with the book laying flat and the photos taking up the entire page.

Matt Eich's ability to connect with so many different subjects for his “Invisible Yoke” series inspired me to try and talk to as many people as I could. As a quiet person, I am never one to strike up a conversation with a stranger, but I really tried to not let myself hide in a corner when others would come visit Kiza or Osman. Matt's photographs are raw, worth a head tilt and very telling of the place that he was photographing. Matt's work influenced me to try and tell a cohesive story while photographing many people, and I hope to continue to work on that skill for the rest of my life by adding on to this iBook in the future.

I happened upon Gabriele Stabile's photos on refugees and their first nights in the United States on the *New York Times* Lens Blog. His photographs showed exhaustion, fear and confusion about all of the new experiences the refugees found in just their hotel rooms. While he mainly photographed their first nights in the hotel, he began to photograph what happened to them once they settled into their new homes. These photos showed family and community but

also a struggle to survive in this new land. Although there is no one subject and there are really two different projects going on at the same time, Gabriele's photographs are extremely telling, and he has found a way for the two stories to overlap in a way. While I haven't photographed a family that has just come to the United States, I hope to do so in order to gain the full scope of how the family begins to adapt and grow in their new situations.

In the fall of 2012 I studied abroad in London and was lucky enough to study under Judah Passow, a world-renowned photographer. Judah's work influenced my Capstone because he has found his niche. He successfully photographs Jewish people living in different places. Two years ago he photographed Jewish people in London and last year he shot Jewish people in Scotland. His ability to tell the stories of the same groups of people in different places made me think about, in the future, using this Capstone as a stepping stone toward photographing refugees who have made a difference in their communities outside of the Syracuse area. I had such a great experience working with Hopeprint this year that I am now leaning towards a career doing work for a not-for-profit and photographing for their campaigns. Learning from Judah helped me think more about waiting for moments and framing my photos in a more interesting way. I now spend a lot more time waiting to click the shutter and taking more than one photo in one spot instead of constantly moving around and taking what seem to be random photographs.

This semester, especially, my work was motivated and influenced by the work that my peers were doing. I was intrigued by how many of them were

working on long-term stories instead of trying to go the newspaper route of spot news photos. While this project was the first time I really delved into a long-term project, my peers were working on some stories much earlier that required them to go back multiple times to shoot. I was inspired by their persistence and the beautiful images that they were able to make as a result of forming these relationships with their subjects. Also, many grants available to students and professionals require photographers to submit stories instead of single images. Photographs are able to make a difference and organizations with grants want to provide photographers with the money to continue their stories and make a change.

This body of work would not have been possible had it not been for the help of so many people. The never-ending support, advice and care from these amazing people have helped me grow in my photography and expand my horizons.

Thank you first and foremost to Osman Ramadhani, Kiza Useni and their families. There were many times that I just showed up at your doorsteps asking to come in and photograph your daily routine, and I appreciate greatly never being told to leave you alone. Your stories, passion and determination inspire me and will hopefully inspire those that view “Forward, Together.”

Thank you to the Wazigua Community Organization of CNY and Hopeprint for opening your doors to me. It was an invaluable experience to meet your members and spend my time photographing them while learning new things every time. I felt like a part of the family and know that I always have somewhere

waiting for me with open arms whenever I come back to Syracuse. My experience with your organizations has made me certain that working with non-profits is in my future career path.

These photographs would have been unsuccessful had it not been for David Sutherland, Mike Davis and Bruce Strong. Your mentorship, praise and criticism of my work, and willingness to with meet me outside of class and office hours helped me grow as a photographer. For three years I thought I was going to have to find a different profession to pursue after college because I felt that I couldn't be successful as a photographer. Your teachings have made me grow into a better person and photographer, and I am more confident of my work and am fully pursuing photography after graduation.

To the Honors program, thank you for having this Capstone as a requirement because it really pushed me to my limits. No matter how many times I complained about it, I am proud of the work that has come out of it.

Thank you to my roommates, friends and fellow photo classmates for driving me to and from shoots, supporting my work and my crazy antics, and, mainly, for keeping me sane this year.

Finally, thank you to my family for never suggesting I start looking for a new career when I struggled – especially to my mom, who has always been my biggest fan.

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